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*Jewish Theological Seminary
of America*

Abraham Lincoln

*By
S. Schechter*

Abraham Lincoln

Memorial Address delivered at the Lincoln
Centennial Celebration of the Jewish
Theological Seminary of America

By
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President



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Abraham Lincoln

ALEXANDER H. STEPHENS, in his characterization of Lincoln, says, "The Union with him in sentiment rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism; whilst his ideas of its structure and formation in logic rested upon nothing but the subtleties of a sophism."

Stephens was, by agreement of all, the ablest historian of the Confederacy, and, some think, its greatest man; and those who read his argument for the Union contained in his address given at Milledgeville, Georgia, before the War between the States began, will further admit that he had the gift of seeing below the surface of things, for the condition of affairs as seen then by superficial observers was all in favor of secession. Stephens was also one of the few prominent men of the Thirtieth Congress for whom Lincoln conceived great admiration during his first appearance at Washington in the capacity of a member of the House of Representatives. Lincoln was present when Stephens delivered "the best speech of an hour's length" he had ever heard, which moved him so deeply that his "old, withered eyes were full of tears." At a later date, again, when Lincoln stood before the country as the President-elect, Stephens was, perhaps, the only Southern statesman whose opinion Lincoln solicited in reference to the coming struggle. Some his-

Lincoln
and
Stephens

torians maintain that Lincoln seriously considered the advisability of inviting Stephens to become a member of his cabinet. A characterization of Lincoln coming from such a source is worthy of our attention. It will, therefore, not be amiss if we devote this hour to this trait of religious mysticism in his character, touching also on one or two other traits which, by their seeming contrast, served either as a corrective or as an emphasis of this mystical trait.

Various
Aspects
of
Lincoln

Whether this aspect has ever been the subject of special treatment by any other writer, I am unable to say. The list of Lincolniana prepared by the Library of Congress and consisting mostly of writings relating to Lincoln, covers a large quarto volume of eighty-six pages. This list was published in 1906, and we may assume that the last two years has brought us a new harvest of Lincolniana. There you will find Lincoln as a lawyer, Lincoln as an organizer, Lincoln as an orator, Lincoln as a general, Lincoln as a debater, Lincoln as a master of men, Lincoln as a financier, and ever so many more Lincolns. For all I know, or rather do not know, the possibility is not excluded that in this enormous mass of literature, Lincoln may have also been treated from the point of view I intend to approach him this evening. Even in this case, it may perhaps not be entirely uninteresting to listen to one whose first acquaintance with Lincoln was made in far-distant Roumania through the medium of Hebrew newspapers

some forty-five years ago. There Lincoln was described as originally a wood-chopper (prose for "rail-splitter"), which fired the imagination of the boy to recognize in the President of the United States, a new Hillel, for legend described the latter as having been engaged in the same occupation before he was called by the people to the dignity of Patriarch, or President of the Sanhedrin. Years have come and years have gone, and the imagination of the boy was in many respects corrected by the reading of serious books bearing on the history of the United States, and particularly on that of the Civil War. But this in no way diminished his admiration for his hero, Abraham Lincoln, whom he was always studying, from the viewpoint of the student of Jewish literature; a literature which, in spite of its eastern origin, affords so much in the way of parallel and simile to the elucidation of many a feature in the story of the great Western of Westerns.

The youth of Lincoln offered little or no opportunity for the display of religious mysticism. Some historians of the high and dry kind take, as it seems, a regular pleasure in speaking of the surroundings that were about Lincoln as "coarse, ignorant and poverty-stricken." In a certain measure this is true. Lincoln himself described the part of Indiana in which he grew up as a "wild region, with many bears and other animals still in the woods." The conditions were thus semi-barbaric, and may be held

Lincoln
and
Hillel

Early
Surround-
ings

responsible for whatever of coarseness and uncouthness respectability detected in the life of Lincoln. Barbaric conditions, however, have the great redeeming virtue that there is little room in them for vulgarity, and this compensates for the lack of many an accomplishment of civilization. By "vulgarity," I mean that vice of civilization which makes man ashamed of himself and his next of kin, and pretend to be somebody else. It is a kind of social hypocrisy, and not less pernicious to the development of character than religious hypocrisy to the development of saintliness. With Lincoln in particular, such simulation to which we are broken in, consciously or unconsciously, in a great civilized community, would have proven fatal, as his great strength lay in the fact that he always remained himself, or, as one of his eulogists aptly said: "Lincoln is not a type. He stands alone—no ancestors, no fellows, no successors."

More serious perhaps is the charge of ignorance. In the biography for the Directory of Congress, Lincoln gave himself the mark, "education defective." Learned institutions of any kind were almost unknown in those regions. "If a straggler supposed to understand Latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard." But even books, which have wrought so many miracles in paving the way for many a self-taught man, leading to the highest academic honors, were scarce. The whole settlement in which Lincoln

spent the greatest part of his early youth, could hardly have commanded such a library as any youngster in our days, even among the poorer classes, might look upon as his property on the day of his confirmation. Even the itinerant ministers of religion who would occasionally visit these pioneer settlements were less distinguished for their sources of information than for their forcible language, well spiced with brimstone and other nether-world ingredients. But, as has already been pointed out by several biographers of Lincoln, there is no cause to remonstrate with Providence on this account. For the few books which Lincoln might regard as his own, so that he could pore over them day and night, were of the best kind, being the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Robinson Crusoe, the Pilgrim's Progress and Weems' "Life of Washington." All these works left a permanent impression upon him, which is traceable in the simplicity of his lucid style, and in his love of fable and parable as a means of illustrating a point. Shakespeare and a few other English poets with whom he made acquaintance at a somewhat later date, may be added to this list. Perhaps it would have been better for Lincoln's reputation if Lincoln's youth, which brought him to Illinois, where he came in contact with a more advanced civilization, would in respect of book learning, have not gone much further beyond the books or kind of books just mentioned—in addition, of course, to such works on

Early Reading

Tendencies
of the
Age

the history and the Constitution of the United States, as were necessary for his mental equipment in his future career as lawyer and statesman. For those were the days in which Volney's "Ruins" and Tom Paine's "Age of Reason" were taken as seriously and read with as much eagerness as a certain class of books dabbling in evolution and the survival of the fittest—pulpit evolution, we might term it—are read and discussed to-day. Lincoln in his zeal for knowledge did not escape the tendency of his age, and in impulsive moments gave expression to certain rationalistic views which were afterwards seized upon with much avidity by friend and foe as representing "the true Lincoln." The student of Hebrew literature, when reading such "Lincolns," emphasizing the shortcomings of his youth and the lack of presentable ancestry, involuntarily thinks of the ancient Rabbinic but truly democratic principle: "They appoint not a leader over the community unless there hangs a mass of reptiles (in the shape of certain blemishes) behind him, lest he become overbearing." Some writers apparently mistake the reptiles for an essential part of the man.

Lincoln outgrew all his puerile rationalistic performances soon enough when the time for such action came as could never have been accomplished without faith, in all its sublimity. This action was the saving of the Union, which was at the same time the great opportunity of his

**Farewell
to
Springfield**

life, and unfortunately also the occasion of his death. No religious hero ever entered upon his mission to conquer the world for an idea or creed with more reverence and a deeper feeling of the need of divine assistance than did Lincoln, when he was about to leave his home and his old associates and associations, good and evil, for his new home and his new life in Washington. "I now leave," he said in his farewell address to his fellow citizens at Springfield, Ill., "not knowing when or whether I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well." This sounds like a prayer; but the concluding lines of his Inaugural, given in Washington on the 4th of March, 1861, rise to the heights of a mystical hymn.

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

"Higher criticism" attributes these lines to a sugges-

Higher
Criticism
of
Lincoln

tion of Seward, but it was Lincoln, as admitted even by the "higher critics," who gave them life and spirit and who transformed them into an illustration of perfect and tender beauty."

The expression, "mystic chords of memory," is significant. Napoleon the Great is recorded to have once made the apt remark, "Religion means memory." If the Union was to be saved, it had to be raised to the dignity of a religion, which means memory, an object hallowed by past associations, which alone holds out promises for the future. Notwithstanding all realistic conceptions of history, the "better angels of our nature," that alone terminate great issues by their readiness for sacrifice, will never enlist in a cause purely material. The better angels as a rule fought for the shrine of their gods; for the expansion of a religious idea of which they were possessed; for their existence as a nation—that is, their institutions, their language, their literature, their traditional customs and usages; for glory and honor—in brief, for their memories; though gold and other material gains always proved a valuable auxiliary as attracting the minor angels. In the case of America, the Western man might struggle for an outlet to the Gulf, the Eastern man might contend for the protection of infant industries, but to engage in a war of such dimensions as the Civil War was, with its loss of men and loss of treasure, the dynamis of an idea and ideal was indispensable. And this idea,

Mystic
Ideal of
Union

defined by the word "Union," was to all intents and purposes a mystical one, as every religious idea is. The State, reaching directly into the life of the citizen through the means of its courts, its schools and its powers of direct taxation, became something concrete and tangible, evident to the dullest intellect in its distribution of reward and punishment, and realized as the tutelar deity of the community. On the other hand, the benefits of the Central Government were, as Stephens rightly pointed out, so silent and unseen, that they were seldom thought of or appreciated, just as is the oxygen in the air we breathe little thought of or appreciated, although it is the very element that gives us life and strength. Hence, the Union was a mere abstraction, invisible, a hypostasis of memory and hope, and appealing only to our sense of reverence and worship or "the better angels of our nature."

The realization of great ideas, heaven-conceived and earth-born, is not accomplished without travail and woe, deep sorrow and repeated disappointment. History of things past, and apocalyptic pictures of events to come, furnish sufficient proof of this. And such was the case with the idea of the Union before it could pass into the consciousness of the people as a solemn fact. The effect of the first Union defeats upon the great persons of Washington and their entourage is recorded by Walt Whitman as "a mixture of awful consternation, uncer-

**The Birth
of the
Union**

tainty, rage, shame, helplessness and stupefying disappointment." Lincoln himself was no exception in this respect, though his calm disposition preserved him from "rage." His sublime faith, again, in the cause of the Union which, in the manner of a Luther at the Diet of Worms, he considered to be God's cause, made real despair impossible. But this confidence did not exclude moments of terrible anguish and intense suffering. At times of frightful suspense, he would envy the common soldier, and would willingly have exchanged places with him, whilst after the terrible defeat of the Union forces at Fredericksburg, he exclaimed: "Oh, if there is a man out of hell that suffers more than I do, I pity him!" His normal condition may be described as expectation inspired by the sense of the awful. It is well depicted in the answer given by him to a delegation of ministers importuning him with their well-meant counsel; and probably reflects his own mental attitude: "Gentlemen," he said, "suppose all the property you possess were in gold, and you had placed it in the hands of Blondin to carry across the Niagara River on a rope. With slow, cautious, steady steps he walks the rope, bearing your all. Would you shake the cable and keep shouting to him, 'Blondin, stand up a little straighter! Blondin, stoop a little more; go a little faster; lean more to the south! Now lean a little more to north!' Would that be your behaviour in such an emergency? No, you would hold your breath,

The Niagara Simile

everyone of you, as well as your tongues. You would keep your hands off until he was safe on the other side." This simile is rather homely in its local color, but it struck me as peculiarly forcible many years ago, long before I had ever seen the Niagara Falls or ever heard of Blondin and his performances. It somehow sounded to me like an echo from the following passage to be found in Bedresi's "Examination of the World," that may be paraphrased thus: "The World is a stormy sea, of depth immeasurable and expanse unbounded. Time is a frail bridge built over it. The one end is fastened by cords to the vast that precedes existence, and its terminus gives glimpses of eternal glory through the light of the presence of the King. The width of the bridge is as a man's cubit, and the guards have disappeared. But thou, Son of Man, without thy consent, thou livest and continuously dost progress over it from the day of thy birth. When thou meditatest upon the narrowness of the span, having no side path either to the right or to the left, when thou perceivest death and destruction encompassing thee as a wall on either side, will not thy heart fail, and wilt thou still glory in power and fame?" Bedresi flourished in the thirteenth century, and his book was written in Hebrew, and I hardly need say that Lincoln never as much as even heard of it.

With the consciousness of the Union, or the body-politic, there developed in Lincoln also the consciousness of

Parallel
in
Bedresi

the national sin, and the need of confession, which indeed is another manifestation of religious mysticism, Renan, in his famous review of Amiel's "Journal," remarks: "He (Amiel) speaks of sin, of salvation, etc., as though they were realities. Sin in particular, engrosses his attention and saddens him." Sin was also a reality with Lincoln, weighing heavily on his conscience, not to be countenanced on any aesthetic considerations or argued away by any philosophic or sociological formula. There it was, and it cried for atonement. Thus, in one of his proclamations, he addresses the nation in the following words: "We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown; but we have forgotten God. . . . We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. Intoxicated by unbroken success, we have become . . . too proud to pray to the God that made us. We have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity. It behooves us, then, . . . to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness." The plural "we" in these proclamations is to be taken literally to include the North, whom he by no means acquitted of the great national sin. "If God wills," he wrote once, "the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God." And in the nation

Conscious-
ness of
Sin

he included fully his own person. He is even said to have exclaimed once in a moment of deep depression, "If our American society and the United States Government are demoralized and overthrown, it will come from the voracious desire for office, this wriggle to live without toil, work and labor, from which I am not free myself."

The greatest human and at the same time religious document, however, left us by Lincoln, for which history hardly affords any model, except perhaps that of the Scriptures is, as is well known, his Second Inaugural: "The Almighty has His own purpose. Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.' If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from the divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope — fervently do we pray — that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the

**Hope and
Prayer**

sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said: 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.' "

When reading the lines just given, one can hardly believe that they formed a part of a message addressed in the nineteenth century to an assembly composed largely of men of affairs and representatives of a special political party, surrounded by all the pomp and paraphernalia of one of the greatest legislative bodies the world had ever seen. One rather imagines himself transported into a camp of contrite sinners determined to leave the world and its vanities behind them, possessed of no other thought but that of reconciliation with their God, and addressed by their leader when about to set out on a course of penance. Indeed, how little the religious sentiments manifest in this document echoed those of either party is evident from a letter of Lincoln to Thurlow Weed, with reference to the Second Inaugural: ". . . . I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told, and, as whatever of humiliation there is in it falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it." To take upon one's self the burden of humiliation in which a whole nation should share, is another

feature of religious mysticism which realizes in the sphere of morality the unity of humanity and in the realm of history the union of the nation, so that it does not hesitate to suffer and to atone for the sins of the generation.

Religious mysticism, however, has the defects of its quality, and the defects are very serious. For, the superabundance of zeal and extravagant enthusiasm such as often accompany religious mysticism may, as experience teaches, very easily degenerate into fanaticism and lawlessness, brushing aside all legal restraints and occasionally ignoring even all humane considerations. From these dangers, Lincoln was preserved by his legal training and not less by his divine humor.

Many writers have shown what Lincoln's experience at the bar meant for him in his later historic guidance of the nation. But the best gift these twenty-three years in the legal profession brought him was that it created in him a legal conscience, which proved immune against the excesses of mysticism. He certainly considered slavery as *the* sin, par excellence. "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong," and to this conviction of the wrong of slavery, statements may be quoted dating from his earliest manhood. About this fact all the best authorities are agreed now, whatever doubts there may have been expressed concerning it a generation ago, and there is no necessity to adduce here more proofs. But he was equally

**Legalism
Antidote to
Mysticism**

convinced of the supremacy of the law, as embodied in the Constitution, its authorized interpretations, and the enactments made under its provisions. Liberty is sacred, but so is the Constitution, the sacred writ of the United States, and in opposition to the most distinguished of his colleagues, he was loath to agree that it can be ruled out of court by the "higher law," or the "unwritten law." "Let every American," he exclaimed in one of his earlier speeches, "every lover of liberty, every well-wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country, and never to tolerate their violation by others." Indeed, he considers "the increasing disregard of the law which pervaded the country as something of ill omen—the growing disposition to substitute the wild and curious passions in lieu of the sober judgments of the courts, and the worse than savage mobs for the executive ministers of justice." The passages just quoted are taken from an address given by Lincoln in January, 1837, when he was fully engaged in his profession as a lawyer. But this conviction of the sovereignty of the law, grows upon him with the growth of his personality and the growth of the temptation to break it. He is "naturally anti-slavery," as he expressed it, and is the more on his guard not to follow the bent of his nature. And the temptation was great indeed, when we consider not only his own inclination, but the general tendency of several of the leaders of his own party, to

Lawlessness
the
Supreme
Crime

think lightly of the Constitution, a tendency expressed in Stanton's well-known words: "It is better to have a country without a Constitution than a Constitution without a country. It is further clear from Lincoln's famous letter to Hodges that he shared to some degree in this feeling. Yet he remained steadfast to his legal principles. He admitted that there is such a thing as "bad laws," but the only remedy he saw was that they "should be repealed as soon as possible; as long as they continue in force, they should be religiously observed." Hence his well-known hesitation to emancipate the slave, and his recurring to it in the end only as a measure of war, which he thought justified by the Constitution.

This legal conscience found a powerful ally in Lincoln's humor. No flaw in an argument could elude it, no human weakness in either party could escape it, but it possessed also that divine quality of wounding and healing at the same time, which made it with no real malice to anyone and charitable in the end to others.

Nothing is more congenial to the student of Jewish literature than these ingredients in Lincoln's mental make-up which found their expression in his stories, his repartee, his wit and sarcasm, in all of which he was such a consummate master. In this literature, the "mashal" (comparison) or "maaseh" (story) are the most prominent. They were mostly used by way of illustration. The use of the "mashal" (or comparison) in par-

**Bad Laws
Must be
Changed**

Lincoln's
Wit and
Humor

ticular, is illustrated by the Rabbis by another "mashal," comparing it to the handle which enables people to take hold of a thing or subject. Occasionally, it forms the introduction to the most solemn discourse. Thus it is recorded of a famous Rabbi that before he commenced his lectures on points of law before his disciples, he would first tell them something humorous to make them laugh, and then, resuming his natural self, commenced in solemn frame of mind his discourse. I need hardly remind you here of the well-known tradition in connection with the President's first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation to the members of his cabinet (September 22, 1862). They met in his office at the White House, and then took their seats in the usual order. Lincoln then took Artemus Ward's book, and read from it the chapter, "High-Handed Outrage at Utica," which he thought very funny, and enjoyed the reading of it greatly, while the members of the cabinet, except Stanton, laughed with him. Then he fell into a grave tone and began the discussion preceding the perusal of this great historical and momentous document.

To give another example: When the Rabbi wanted to impress his audience with the evil consequences of intemperance, he would say, "Story: Once upon a time there was a pious man whose father was addicted to strong drink, which brought great shame upon him. On one occasion, the pious man walked in the street in a pouring rain, when he perceived a drunken man lying in

the gutter and exposed to the abuse of the street urchins, who made sport of him. He thereupon thought in his heart, 'I will induce father to come here to show him the humiliation he brings upon himself by his dissipation.' The father came, but the first thing he did was to ask the drunken man for the address of the inn where such good wine was sold." This reminds one strongly of Lincoln's well-known answer to the charge brought against one of his most successful generals that he sometimes drank too much. Lincoln merely asked to know the brand of whisky consumed by him so that he "might distribute it among some of the other generals." Lincoln's pleading with his friends and foes that there is no hope for America to live outside of the Constitution if they cannot any longer live in it (I am unable to locate the passage or to give the exact words) reminded me also when I read it of the following Jewish parable: "Once upon a time, a fox was walking by the banks of a river, and he saw the fish swimming from place to place. 'Why this unrest?' asked the fox. The fish answered, 'Because of the nets spread out for us by the sons of men.' Thereupon, the fox said, 'Would you not prefer to move to the land and I and you will live together, as my ancestors and yours did before us?' The fish answered, 'Art thou the one who is spoken of as the sage among the animals? Thou art a fool. If, in our element of life we cannot always escape

**Rabbinic
Story-telling**

**Fable
of the Fish**

danger, the less so in the element that means death for us.' ”

**Humor
in
Controversy**

Lincoln's humor not only served him as a means of instruction and illustration, but proved also an excellent weapon of offence and defence. You all probably remember the following story which he told once when discussing the newspaper attacks on his administration, emanating from the various quarters which had little in common except their hostility to the President:

“A traveler on the frontier found himself out of his reckoning one night in a most inhospitable region. A terrific thunderstorm came up, to add to his trouble. He floundered along until at length his horse gave out. The lightning afforded him the only clue to his way, but the peals of thunder were frightful. One bolt, which seemed to crush the earth beneath him, brought him to his knees. By no means a praying man, his petition was short and to the point: ‘O Lord, if it's all the same to you, give us a little more light and a little less noise.’ ”

**Less Noise
More Light**

The noise indeed was terrific and light was necessary. I once read a remark that every great movement is liable to suffer not less by the arrogance of the few than by the ignorance of the many. The many in this case were the people at large who, in their slow and sluggish way, could only be moved by the sequence of events under the tuition of such a master mind as Lincoln. More hopeless was the case of the few who looked upon themselves as the

elect, and neither minded nor cared for the people behind them. These self-constituted advisers did not take into consideration that there were such things as a Constitution and Constitutional guarantees, which as the sworn officer of the law Lincoln could not possibly ignore. They were always ready with their counsel to Lincoln, and even the logic of events never cured them of their dogmatism and positiveness. Only lately, I read a book by one of these elect, written more than a generation after Lincoln's death, in which the impression is conveyed that the Civil War might have been easily averted had the President but followed the advice offered to him by the writer and his friends.

"And this reminds me of a story," to use a favorite expression of Lincoln. I give the story in the peculiar version I heard it once from "one who tells" Milton's (Maggid) though the main features of it are known from the Midrashim and the Pseudepigrapha, not to mention "Paradise Lost." "When the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to create man, He invited the angels and asked them for their opinion. Their answer was, 'Let man not be created, for he will prove a sinful creature.' And so indeed it came to pass, 'that the wickedness of man was upon the earth.' Then they came to God and said, 'We told you so!' The Lord's answer was, 'If you are so self-righteous descend to the earth and see whether with all your heavenly bringing up you will turn out less proof

**Angelic
Interference**

against sin than man?' A certain number of angels did descend to earth, where they made the acquaintance of the daughters of man, 'and brought forth the generation of giants, men of renown.' But the great majority of the angels withdrew to a remote corner of heaven, eternally absorbed in the admiration of their own virtue which prevented them from begetting giants and men of renown and continuing out of sheer habit to sing the praise, not of God, but of themselves."

The counterpart of this celestial coterie is known on earth under various appellatives bestowed upon them by themselves, such as "illuminati," "elect," "seekers after perfection," etc., and the only way to meet them is with humor in its various aspects. Serious argument is of little use on such occasions, for they appeal to the will of God, "which prevails," and should be indeed the last appeal in all matters; but it never occurs to them that there is a possibility that they are not the chosen vessels for this revelation of the will of God. As Lincoln expressed it, "There is certainly no contending against the will of God, but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining and applying it to particular cases." How he dealt with the "certain ones" may be best illustrated by the following episodes:

A member of a church, at a reception, closed his remarks with the pious hope "that the Lord is on our side." "I am not at all concerned about that," commented the President, "for we know that the Lord is always on the

side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and the nation should be on the Lord's side."

This suspicion against overzeal, which might make it possible for man not to be on the Lord's side even when in the service of a righteous cause, recalls to my mind the following Rabbinic paraphrase of I Kings, 19: 14, which is not without a touch of humor. "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts, because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant." But God says: "It is my covenant, not thy covenant." The prophet then proceeds, "They have thrown down thy altars and slain thy prophets with the sword." But God rejoins, "They are my altars and my prophets. What does this concern thee?" Thereupon the prophet says, "And I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away." Whereupon, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, "Thou thinkest of self. Resign thy office as prophet." This is indeed the great danger of every mission of this nature, that man is very often liable to confuse his own cause with that of God. I remember to have read somewhere a conversation between two American statesmen. In the heat of the argument the one quoted the well-known dictum of Johnson, "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." Whereupon, the other retorted, "Sir, you overlook the possibilities of reform and progress." The history of Reconstruction unfortunately showed that the retort was not without a grain of truth.

**Overzeal
Rebuked**

**Lincoln's
Attitude to
Advice**

Even more characteristic is Lincoln's answer given to a delegation of ministers from Chicago, urging him to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation before he considered it fit to do so. One of the ministers felt it his duty to make a more searching appeal to the President's conscience. Just as they were retiring, he turned and said to Lincoln: "What you have said to us, Mr. President, compels me to say to you in reply that it is a message to you from our Divine Master, through me, commanding you, sir, to open the doors of bondage, that the slave may go free!" Generally, "the master of men" followed the counsel of old sages, listening politely to every advice offered to him and deciding as seemed to him best:

Listen to every counsel,
And the best of them choose,
And make the counsel of thy heart to stand;
For there is none more faithful unto thee than it.
For a man's soul is sometimes wont to bring him tidings
More than seven watchmen that sit on high on a watchtower.

But he had little patience with dogmatism of the kind just cited, and his answer was: "That may be, sir, for I have studied this question by night and by day, for weeks and for months, but if it is, as you say, a message from your Divine Master, is it not odd that the only channel He could send it by was that roundabout route by that awfully wicked city of Chicago?" This is the version

given by Schuyler Colfax in his "Reminiscences" of Lincoln, but there is also another version of it, which seems more authoritative, in which the uncharitable remark about the metropolis of the West is omitted. It reads: "I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me. . . . Whatever shall appear to be God's will, I will do." The fact is Lincoln recognized no other medium for this divine revelation than "the will of the people, constitutionally expressed, which is the ultimate law for all." This is indeed the "mystery of democracy, or sentiment of the equality before God of all His creatures," which assumes that all the world's people are prophets, and perceives in the Constitution of the United States the best guarantee against false prophets.

As far as Lincoln himself is concerned, all the false prophets have disappeared, for indeed there were false prophets both among the Republicans and the Democrats who predicted most dire consequences from Lincoln's election. In a letter to General J. M. Schofield, who had to contend so much with the various factions within the Republican Party itself, Lincoln wrote, "If both factions, or neither, shall abuse you, you will probably be about right. Beware of being assailed by one and praised by the other." Lincoln passed through both

**The
Mystery
of
Democracy**

**Above
all
Factions**

stages, having been first assailed by all parties, and now praised by all, even by many eminent Southerners who do not fail to recognize his greatness. And thus he is doubly right.

The half century that has wellnigh elapsed since his death has dispelled the mists that encompassed him on earth. Men now not only recognize the right which he championed, but behold in him the standard of righteousness, of liberty, of conciliation and truth. In him, as it were personified, stands the Union, all that is best and noblest and enduring in its principles, in which he devoutly believed and served mightily to save. When to-day, the world celebrates the century of his existence, he has become the ideal of both North and South, of a common country, composed not only of the factions that once confronted each other in war's dreadful array, but of the myriad thousands that have since found in the American nation the hope of the future and the refuge from age-entrenched wrong and absolutism. To them Lincoln, his life, his history, his character, his entire personality, with all its wondrous charm and grace, its sobriety, patience, self-abnegation and sweetness, has come to be the very prototype of a rising humanity.

A certain Jewish saint who had the misfortune to survive the death of his greatest disciple, is recorded to have exclaimed: "O Lord, thou shouldst be grateful to me

that I have trained for you so noble a soul." This is somewhat too bold, but we may well be grateful to God for having given us such a great soul as Lincoln, "who, under God, gave this nation a new birth of freedom," and to our dear country, which by its institutions and its people rendered possible the greatness for which Abraham Lincoln shall stand forever.

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